Name: _____ Class: _____

Mother to Son

By Langston Hughes
1922

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was an American poet, novelist, and playwright. He was also one of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, the cultural, social, and artistic movement of Black artists in New York City between the end of World War I and the mid-1930s. ***Purpose for Reading:*** *To understand how the speaker uses a metaphor to convey a message to her son about failure and success. In this lesson, you'll practice analyzing an author's use of figurative language. This means paying attention to similes and metaphors. As you read, take notes on the metaphor and the message it reveals about dealing with challenges.*

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor —
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now —
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. In the poem, whom is the speaker addressing and about what?
    A. A mother is telling a story to her child about her own childhood.
    B. A mother is speaking to her son about climbing a crystal staircase.
    C. A son is recounting a conversation his mother had with him about the general struggle towards earning a comfortable living.
    D. A mother is warning her son about the difficulties of life and the struggle to persevere.

2. What is the central metaphor utilized in the poem?
    A. The narrator describes a tiring climb up a beat-up staircase, which represents her persisting through difficulties and struggles in life.
    B. The narrator compares a crystal staircase to her own life, symbolic of her own goals and the struggle towards them.
    C. The narrator describes her climb up a dirty staircase which transforms into a crystal stair, which represents her ability to rise above difficulties.
    D. The narrator describes herself going down a decrepit staircase, a figurative depiction of her continued problems.

3. Which of the following statements best describes a major theme of the poem?
    A. Never forget your family.
    B. Persevere when life isn't easy.
    C. Hope is the answer to all challenges.
    D. Respect your elders.

4. Which excerpt from the poem best captures the speaker's message to her son?
    A. "Well, son, I'll tell you: / Life for me ain't been no crystal stair." (Lines 1-2)
    B. "It's had tacks in it, / And splinters, / And boards torn up, / And places with no carpet on the floor — / Bare." (Lines 3-7)
    C. "I'se been a-climbin' on, / And reachin' landin's, / And turnin' corners" (Lines 9-11)
    D. "So boy, don't you turn back. / Don't you set down on the steps / 'Cause you finds it's kinder hard. / Don't you fall now — / For I'se still goin', honey" (Lines 14-18)

5. What message or theme does this poem express about dealing with challenges?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. The speaker says, "life for me ain't been no crystal stair" (Line 20). What would a crystal staircase be — both literally and figuratively?

2. In your opinion, do all Americans have equal access to the American Dream? What are some of the factors that could make it easier or harder to achieve happiness in America? Why do you think Harlem Renaissance writers focused on the American Dream?

3. How do we achieve our goals or dreams? How does circumstance, status, and identity factor into this? In the context of this poem, how do people overcome adversity? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

4. In the context of this poem, what is the meaning of family? What do you think it means to be a parent, especially a mother? How do you relate to your parents or guardians when they are trying to give you advice? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

5. Thinking about the other texts we've read in this unit, which character would agree with the mother that life has been hard, but you have to keep going? Explain why or how?